

# The Lowdown on Laser Hair Removal

If you want to nix plucking, waxing or shaving from your beauty regimen, then laser hair removal may seem like a dream come true. After all, who wouldn't want to show off silky-smooth skin all summer long without the constant upkeep?

Until recent years, darker-skinned women couldn't count on laser hair removal to become fuzz-free. There were too many horror stories of what could happen, like dark spots, light spots and unsightly scars. But recent scientific developments have made laser hair removal safer for women of all colors.

Laser hair removal gets rid of unwanted hair quickly and easily. The wavelength of light in the laser attacks the pigment in the hair follicle, which then heats and destroys the hair.

There are three different types of lasers used for hair removal: Alexandrite and Diode lasers have short wavelengths and are more suited for lighter-colored skin. Nd:YAG lasers have long wavelengths, which are more suitable for dark skin. Thanks to newer developments in lasers, laser hair removal can be tailored to your skin tone.

## New technology for lasers on dark skin

About 12 years ago, Dr. Eliot Battle Jr., M.D., founder of Cultura Cosmetic



Dermatology and Laser Center in Washington, D.C., worked with Dr. Rox Anderson, M.D. at Harvard Medical School to make lasers safer for dark skin. From that research, Dr. Battle said they learned, "If we use a longer wavelength and cool the skin on the top layer, we can treat any skin color safely."

According to Dr. Valerie Callender, board certified dermatologist and director of Callender Skin and Laser Center in Mitchellville, Maryland, "New technology in lasers goes deeper, so they're a lot safer." Deeper wavelength penetration is important because it's farther from the pigment in the hair shaft and follicle. The problem with a shorter wavelength for dark skin is that it might seek pigment in the top layer of the skin, which could result in light or dark spots. A new technology adds a cooling unit that absorbs some of the laser's heat, thus cooling the surface of the skin as the laser does its work

so that the skin does not overheat, which causes spotting.

Lengthening the laser's pulse duration to target the hair slower is also protective. "Longer wave length, longer pulse duration and the cooling effect make laser hair removal more effective and less painful for dark skin," said Dr. Callender.

This is exciting news, considering the unique concerns of dark skin. Lasers can smooth out bumps caused by shaving and remove dark spots caused by plucking or shaving. "Laser hair removal is the first thing that improves hair texture and gets rid of dark spots," said Dr. Battle. "Patients are ecstatic about not having to shave or wax and getting rid of dark spots and texture from ingrown hair."

## How much does it cost?

Laser hair removal can permanently reduce hair, but it does not permanently remove it. It takes at

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least eight treatments to see a majority of the hair gone. After that you may only need one or two maintenance visits per year. Each visit can cost anywhere from \$50 to \$600, depending on the area being treated. Most offices have package deals.

However, lasers can only remove dark hair, not grey, thin, or blond hair, because dark hair is easier to target. “The darker and coarser the hair, the easier it is for the laser to work,” said Dr. Jason R. Lupton, board certified dermatologist at San Diego Dermatology and Laser Center. “The laser works very well with dark, coarse hair on the chin or bikini line.” Those who experience keloids and hypertrophic scarring are not recommended for the procedure.

## Protect yourself from side effects

Side effects from laser hair removal for dark skin include blistering, hyperpigmentation (darkening of the skin) and hypopigmentation (loss of pigmentation, which is the most serious). “Darker skin is more likely to scar from blistering,” said Dr. Daniel Ronel, M.D., board certified plastic surgeon and pediatrician at Ronel Plastic Surgery in Santa Fe, New Mexico. “If the person loses pigment, it doesn’t come back.” However, if an experienced doctor using the right laser for your skin performs laser hair removal, your chances of side effects are slim. There are also homeopathic treatments and prescription creams you can use to minimize scarring.

Do your homework to protect yourself from possible side effects. Treat laser hair removal like any other type of medical procedure, and do some background research first. Then find a doctor who is experienced with lasers and knows how to perform laser hair removal treatments on African-American skin. That way if you decide to go ahead with it, you can make the best, educated decision for your skin. **S**

## Researching the Right Laser Hair Removal Facility

Not all laser hair removal facilities are created equal, so finding the right doctor and laser facility involves research. There are plenty of facilities that offer the same services and are run by laser hair removal practitioners, but it’s best to entrust your body’s largest organ to a knowledgeable physician. Below are a few things to consider before you get started.

**Cost:** Don’t be a bargain shopper when it comes to laser hair removal. It isn’t advisable to go with the cheapest deal in town; you don’t want to take any risks with getting what you pay for.

**Experience:** If you are dark-skinned, find a dermatologist or plastic surgeon that has a wealth of experience performing laser hair removal on dark skin. Don’t be afraid to ask for references. You can significantly decrease your risk of side effects by seeing a qualified doctor.

**Credentials:** Almost anyone can operate a laser and perform laser hair removal, but it’s best to see a doctor who is a board certified or at least an expert at treating patients of color for laser hair removal. Ask your doctor about his training in laser hair removal for dark skin. Also, ask about the experience and credentials of any nurses who may be working with the doctor.

**Lasers:** Be sure to ask what types of lasers and how many there are available at the doctor’s facility. Also, find out which type of laser the practitioner plans to use on you. If the facility only has one, that should raise some flags.

Learn more about laser hair removal by visiting [Hairremovaljournal.org](http://Hairremovaljournal.org).